

Frontier Conference Men's Basketball Preview 2012

Lights will be chased by a loaded Frontier

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The 2010-11 Frontier Conference men's basketball season was one for the ages. From top to bottom, the league was as tough as it's been in a long time, and the Frontier playoffs were as competitive as ever.

But as a new season dawns this weekend, fans could be in for a real treat, because this year's Frontier may even be better. With teams like Great Falls, Montana Tech and Lewis-Clark State vastly improved, every single game over the next two months could be a barn burner.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights were picked to win the league title this fall. The Lights (13-2) won a share of the league regular season championship and then beat Carroll College for the postseason crown last March. And with all five starters and its whole bench back this season, Northern will be the team with a bulls eye on its back. But the Lights will also be the team that the Frontier title has to go through this season, there's no doubt about that.

And with stellar teams like Northern, Westminster and UM-Western at the top of the conference, along with all of the improved and up-and-coming squads, this could be a record-setting year for the Frontier when the NAIA national tournament field is announced in early March.

Here's a breakdown of the Frontier Conference in its predicted order of finish.

MSU-Northern Lights

2011-12 Record: 13-2

2010-11 Record: 10-4, 24-9

2011 Finish: 1st, Postseason Champion

Northern head coach Shawn Huse enters his 10th Frontier season at the helm. He's led the Lights to two NAIA tourney appearances and last year's Frontier postseason title. Northern is loaded with senior talent, including starters Shaun Tatarka, LaVon Myers, Joe Simpson and Sean Kelly, as well as David Maddock, Jordan Harris, Chris Brown and Ben Mitchell. Add in star junior Devin Jackson and the emergence of freshman Corbin Pearson and the Lights are even deeper than they were a year ago. Everyone will be gunning for the Lights this season, but being one of the top 3-point shooting teams and a squad who led the NAIA in defensive field goal percentage for much of last season, it will be tough for anyone to knock the Lights from their Frontier perch this year.

Carroll College Saints

2011-12 Record: 7-5

2010-11 Record: 10-4, 23-9

2011 Finish: 1st, Postseason runner up



MSU-Northern's Devin Jackson lays in a basket during last Friday's college basketball game in Havre. After winning the 2011 Frontier title, the Lights are favored to repeat this season.

Carroll comes into this season returning a wealth of talent, and fresh off a trip to the NAIA Sweet 16 last March. But third-year head coach Brandon Veltri's squad has stumbled at times early this season. Still, the Saints have too much talent and size not to once again compete for a league title. Carroll returns one of the most prolific Frontier post players in recent history in senior Andy Garland, as well as starters Byago Diouf and Nick Jones. And with bigs like Tony Dalton (6-6), Chase Godecke (6-8) and James MacIntyre (6-6), the Saints will have as good a chance at anybody to win a league title and go back to Kansas City for the third time in the last four years.

UM-Western Bulldogs

2011-12 Record: 12-4

2010-11 Record: 9-5, 22-10

2011 Finish: 3rd

Western has been knocking on the door of greatness the last two seasons. The Bulldogs, under fifth-year head coach Steve Keller, have made two straight trips to the NAIA national tournament and came within a point of beating No. 1 ranked Robert Morris last March. And with Frontier Player of the Year Brandon Brown back, the Dawgs' will make another run at the league crown. Brown is averaging 23 points per game, but he has plenty of help in the form of post players Tyler Hurley (6-6), Kyle Perry (6-9) and transfer Jake Owsley (6-8). With that front line, and the dynamic Brown, it will be another big year in Dillon.

Westminster Griffins

2011-12 Record: 12-4

2010-11 Record: 8-6, 21-9

2011 Finish: 4th

A big change took place in Salt Lake City this summer when Tommy Connor left to become an assistant at Utah. Westminster promoted assistant Adam Hiatt to the position of head coach and though last year the Griffins had their worst finish since joining the Frontier, they are back this season. Ranked 10th in the NAIA, the Griffins are poised for a big season, especially with 6-7 forward Ben Walker returning after missing last year with an injury. And 6-4 swingman Jake Orchard is as versatile a player as there is in the Frontier. Orchard scored 30 points in the Griffins' upset of defending Big Sky champion Northern Colorado this season, and it looks as though the Griffins are right back in the mix in the Frontier.

Lewis-Clark State Warriors

2011-12 Record: 11-3

2010-11 Record: 6-8, 16-12

2011 Finish: 5th

There's also a new head coach at Lewis-Clark State. Brandon Rinta, a former head coach at NW Nazarene replaces former Northern head coach Tim Walker, who resigned after last season. And Rinta has the Warriors back on track. With a virtually new roster, led by 6-6 juniors P.J. Bolte and Danny Marshall, the Warriors are off to a hot start. And they will be a tough team to defend as they play six players who stand 6-6 or better. LC's resurgence makes the Frontier an even tougher league.

Rocky Mountain Battlin' Bears

2011-12 Record: 7-8

2010-11 Record: 4-10, 11-20

2011 Finish: 7th

Since Rocky captured the NAIA national championship three years ago, it's been tough going in Billings. But 12th-year head coach Bill Dreikosen has reason to be optimistic. The Bears played a rigorous nonconference schedule which should have them prepared for Frontier play. And they boast one of the most dominant front lines in the league with 6-7 Matt Fogarty, 6-9 Joel Barndt and 6-9 Sergio Trocha. If Rocky can find some balance on the perimeter, the Bears will be a very tough opponent this season.

Great Falls Argos

2011-12 Record: 12-3

2010-11 Record: 5-9, 12-18

2011 Finish: 6th

The Argos have finished at or near the bottom of the Frontier for years now and they were picked to finish there again this season. But sixth-year head coach Steve Silsby has other ideas. The Argos are off to their best start since the school reinstated basketball over a decade ago, and they have perhaps the deepest roster of any team in the Frontier. With key returnees back like Melvin Williams, Marcel Towns, Leon Sutton and L.J. Jones, as well as budding stars like 6-6 James Holmes, the Argos look like a team ready to make a real run at the top half of the Frontier Conference this season.

Montana Tech Orediggers

2011-12 Record: 8-3

2010-11 Record: 4-10, 11-20

2011 Finish: 7th

The Orediggers are another team on the rise. Head coach Aaron Woliczko is in his second season in charge and Tech is off to a great start. The return of guards Tyree Haynie and A.J. Paine help, but the Diggers' have plenty of good role players too, and though they were picked to finish last this season, with the talent and their methodical style of play, Tech could easily become the surprise of the Frontier over the next two months.